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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [EAID](#) [AF](#)
SUBJECT: IRANIAN INFLUENCE IN BAMYAN, A HIDDEN STRUGGLE FOR
HEARTS AND MINDS

REF: A. KABUL 495
[1](#)B. KABUL 3097

Classified By: Acting PRT and Sub-National Governance Patricia A. McNerney for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (S) Summary. Bamyan Province is a significant center of gravity for Iranian influence in Afghanistan. Iran has political reach through its sponsorship of the Hezb-e Wahdat (Unity Party), headed by Second VP Khalili based in Bamyan. A Council of Mujahedeen Commanders remains intact there, and should the Taliban return to power, Iran would be in position to revive leverage through these armed proxies. The more visible platforms for Iranian influence in Bamyan are schools and charities that spread propaganda and provide intelligence cover, in addition to education. Among moderate Hazaras in Bamyan, strong suspicion of Iran's intentions and rejection of Shiite fundamentalism countervail this influence. Even though some of the development and stabilizing effects that Iran brings to Bamyan parallel U.S. interests, Iranian activities are tainted with anti-American and anti-coalition messages and constitute a second front of Islamization in Afghanistan. In this hidden struggle for the hearts and minds of the province's overwhelmingly Shia Hazaras, the best antidote we have is the New Zealand PRT (NZPRT) and U.S.-sponsored projects that are helping to bring governance and development across Bamyan. End Summary

Traditional Persian Sphere of Influence

[1](#)2. (C) Bamyan Province is a significant center of gravity for Iranian influence in Afghanistan. Strategic, political, religious, and cultural dimensions have long marked Bamyan as the eastern margin of the Persian sphere of interest and in the recent past as a locus of Iranian-sponsored resistance against both the Soviets and the Taliban. Iran's influence in Bamyan today is a continuation of this legacy, where the nature of officially promoted activities is as enigmatic and multi-sided as the Iranian regime itself. Even Bamyan Governor Habiba Sarobi, who is an astute interpreter of Afghan affairs, agrees on this point.

[1](#)3. (C) Iran's reach into Bamyan follows its current interest in the evolution of Afghanistan as a stable, pro-Iranian state that opposes Sunni extremism and is multi-ethnic, through the enfranchisement of the Hazara people. In contrast to its manifest influence in Kabul, Herat, and along the Western border, Iran's presence is largely hidden from view in the rural backlands of the west and south. Nevertheless, Bamyan has special political and strategic importance for Iran as the heart of the Hazarajat, which stretches across portions of contiguous provinces in Central Afghanistan. The Hazaras constitute the largest Shiite community and third largest ethnic group in Afghanistan after the Pashtuns and Tajiks, accounting for a disputed percentage of the population somewhere between 9%

and 19%. (In addition, a majority of the 900,000 refugees and over one million economic migrants in Iran are Hazara, a good many of them from Bamyan.)

Tapping Hazaran Leaders to Influence GIROA Policy

¶4. (C) The incorporation of political leaders from Bamyan into GIROA has in some measure begun to mitigate the Hazaras' traditional status as victims of often brutal Pashtun suppression at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Because Iran has been their principal patron and sanctuary, these leaders also happen to be among Iran's most overt Afghan champions. Prominent among them are Second Vice President Karim Khalili, who is also Secretary General of the most disciplined, organized and ambitious Hazara political party, the Hezb-e Wahdat (Unity Party); along with other Wahdat leaders MP Ustad Mohammad Akbari and Bamyan Deputy Governor Mohammed Nadir Fahimi. With Khalili on the ticket, it is no surprise that Wahdat has endorsed President Karzai's reelection.

¶5. (C) Iran's involvement in contemporary Hazara politics stems from its indirect participation in the bloody wars that belie Bamyan's benign aspect today. This involvement dates from 1979 when the overthrow of the Shah of Iran coincided with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Elements of the revolutionary regime quickly began sponsoring and attempting to manipulate eight disparate Hazara resistance organizations, among them a group that had been in Qom with Ayatollah Khomeini and another that received the support of the Sepah-e Pasdaran (Iranian Revolutionary Guards). These

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factions spent much of the Soviet occupation in relative autonomy warring inconclusively with each other, until Iran brokered the creation of Hezb-e Wahdat in 1988, during a period of Soviet-Iran rapprochement that allowed Iran to have unimpeded air access and a "consulate" in Bamyan. Following the Soviet withdrawal, Wahdat became embroiled in the civil war among the mujahedeen. It put up determined resistance during the Taliban period, again with Iranian support. Bamyan city changed hands twice, and there were multiple atrocities on both sides, including three documented massacres of Hazaras. The Taliban suppressed the Iranian-backed resistance but never fully consolidated their hold in the province and were on the verge of launching an ethnic cleansing campaign against the Hazara to "cut off Iran's hand" in Bamyan at the time of U.S. intervention in ¶2001.

Indicators of Iran's Military and Intelligence Reach

¶6. (SECRET/REL TO USA, ISAF, NATO) Echoes of this period continue today, with a steady if often ambiguous stream of indicators that Iranian military and intelligence organizations continue to operate in Bamyan. A sampling of NZPRT and other sources between April 1 and May 15 illustrates:

- Saran Wafa (an Iranian name) was identified as the leader of 30-40 armed men who receive aid from Iran and are collecting funds to help Bamyan MP Akbari run for President;
- An alleged Iranian agent of influence, Ahmad Ohmid, was using U.S. currency to recruit people in Yakwalang District and to fund anti-coalition propaganda;
- Members of the Selah e Pastern e Engelab e Esamli (Army of the Guardian of the Islamic Revolution) delivered humanitarian assistance in Waras District;
- The Bamyan National Directorate of Security (NDS) Chief complains he does not dare report on Iranian activities because Iran's influence at NDS HQ could threaten his safety.
- The NZPRT receives frequent weapons and munitions turn-ins, most of them believed to come from Tala-wa-Barfek district in neighboring Baghlan Province. A recovery on May

5 included 24 Iranian anti-personnel mines dated 1996 and 1997. The proximate origin of these mines is not known, but they were serviceable, indicating that they may be from a larger, well-preserved cache. Many reports also cite ties to the Taliban, but these revolve around ethnic Tajiks and Pashtuns in the north-east corner of the province, and any widespread Hazara collaboration with the Taliban is implausible.

17. (SECRET/REL TO USA, ISAF, NATO) A Council of Mujahedeen Commanders allegedly remains intact as a mutual support organization based in Bamyan. The Council is headed by Deputy Governor Fahimi and reports to VP Khalili, who maintains contact with Iranian intelligence officials. By implication, the Council retains the ability to revive resistance should the Taliban return to power, a reversal that could also prompt Iran once again to employ leverage through armed proxies within Afghanistan.

18. (S) The more visible platform for Iranian influence in Bamyan is its support for charitable foundations, libraries, madrassas, secular schools and humanitarian assistance. Public Iranian support for education dates to their participation in the Bonn Process of 2001. Iran's attention to education in Bamyan, where literacy is significantly below 10 percent, cannot help but have strategic impact. Their widespread programs are largely separate from the rudimentary public school system, carry heavy pro-Iranian ideological content and evidently (rather a curious choice of words for a highly significant fact) provide intelligence cover. The most prominent vehicle is the Ahlubit Assembly, sponsored by the office of Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei. Within Afghanistan, the Council of Mosques, headed by VP Khalili, channels Ahlubit support that trains mullahs and pays student expenses in a network of at least 16 madrassas, some of them with hundreds of students, in Yakawlang, Panjab and Waras Districts. These madrassas also serve as centers for distributing humanitarian assistance to the population, along with pro-Iranian propaganda. Iran's information operations also include television and radio broadcasts that reach deep into Bamyan, where satellite dishes can be seen on rooftops in even the most remote villages.

19. (C) To the extent that Iran seeks to spread its influence in Bamyan through Shiite Islam, its greatest impact is in the rural areas, where there is less exposure to the outside world and where mullahs are often the most important

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authority figures. Among the more urbanized, moderate and educated Hazaras, strong suspicions of Iran's intentions and rejection of its brand of Shiite fundamentalism countervail this influence. There is no better example of this divide than the recent controversy over the restriction of women's rights in the new Family Code, inspired by conservative Shiite cleric Ayatollah Asif Mohseni. In addition to the Kabul protest that gathered international attention, vocal disapproval of the code came from Bamyan city. Governor Sarobi is foremost among Bamyan's Iran doubters. Although she is a strong advocate for education from whatever source, she is quick to criticize Iran for delivering more propaganda than humanitarian assistance and blocked their proposal to establish a library in the provincial capital, while allowing Iran to establish a vocational school. Governor Sarobi's vision of a peaceful and developing Bamyan has also made her a strong opponent of Hezb-e Wahdat as well as Iran's sponsorship of its blood-stained brand of politics. This helps explain why she and her deputy are often at loggerheads.

110. (C) Even though some of the development and stabilizing effects that Iran brings to Bamyan parallel U.S. interests, Iranian activities are tainted throughout with anti-American messages. There are frequent reports of preaching against the Great Satan in the mosques and madrassas, and of local officials taking favors from Iranian agents in exchange for spreading propaganda against the U.S. and the coalition.

Added together, Iran's activities in Bamyan can be interpreted as a distant extension of the Shia political revival and a non-kinetic second front of Islamization within Afghanistan. In the struggle for Hazara hearts and minds, the best antidote we have to this negative Iranian influence is the active presence and concrete contributions that the New Zealand PRT and U.S.-sponsored projects are making to governance and development across Bamyan.

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